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## ABSTRACT

Preschool children display behavior changes in the classroom after a new sibling is born. In an effort to address this issue, suggestions were devised to aid teachers in helping the preschool child adapt to a new sibling with positive results. This paper describes a parent's workshop structure to help prepare parents for the interaction between the new sibling and the preschooler. Teachers are also advised to give a lesson to their students on "the new baby," which includes stories, dramatic play, and discussions. The outcomes of this type of lesson have shown that that preschoolers display more positive behavior in class. Following an introduction, the paper discusses what behaviors to look for in preschool students when a new baby arrives in the family; setting up a parent/teacher workshop to help expectant parents prepare their preschoolers for a new baby; preparing preschool children in the classroom for a new sibling; how classmates help ease stressful feelings in the student with a new sibling; and books on new siblings to read in the preschool class. (Contains 14 references.) (SD)

## A Preschooler's Dread — That New Baby

Irene Barros

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### **Abstract**

Preschool children display behavior changes in the classroom after a new sibling is born. Suggestions were devised to aid teachers in helping the preschool child adapt to a new sibling with positive results. First, a parent's workshop helps prepare the parents for the interaction between the new sibling and the preschooler. Teachers are advised to give a lesson to their students on "the new baby" which includes stories, dramatic play, and discussions. The results have shown preschoolers display more positive behavior in class.

### **Introduction**

Amanda is five years old. She has been a student in day care, since she was two and a half years old. She is a self-confident child, always first to answer questions in class, a leader in socialization, and the teacher's helper. As I enter her kindergarten class, she is whining to her teacher. "I don't know what is the matter with her lately; she's become very clingy," her teacher expresses to me in confidence. I relate that perhaps she's responding to the new baby. Amanda's sister is now eleven months old. At first Amanda was delighted with her sibling's birth, but she is now experiencing mixed emotions.

Most children welcome new siblings with excitement and affection, but the changes in their lives may also frustrate them. A mixture of positive and negative feelings and behaviors is common in children when a new brother or sister arrives (Kramer, NNCC.com 1992).

As a teacher in preschool, I have seen negative behavior in the children whose parents are expecting or have had a new baby. What I propose is to present

teachers with a way to prepare the preschooler for his or her new sibling with positive results.

### **What Behaviors To Look For In Preschool Students When A New Baby Arrives In The Family**

A lot of children begin to show oppositional behavior, which basically means that they do not follow the rules anymore. They say “no” a lot and become more aggressive. This is classic behavior. If these children do not feel that they are getting their fair share of attention in a positive way, they will set up another way to get it. The basic thought is any attention is better than no attention. Some children may take out their aggression on a classmate. Kids cannot properly vocalize the anxiety, jealousy and fear they may be feeling. If you can interpret such actions as communication - rather than as bad behavior - you are way ahead of the game. (Aylward, Ladendorff & Wade, Vidbook.com 1999)

Young children typically cannot put their feelings into words; they act them out. However, not every child reacts in the same way. Experts say there are several signs of distress to look for in a child. A normally bubbly child may suddenly become withdrawn, sad or sullen. Some children become clingy: others act like everything is fine. A child totally unaffected by the appearance of a new sibling simply does not exist (Aylward, Ladenforff & Wade Vidbook.com 1999).

There is other behavior that is common in siblings of new babies. The

children may become more demanding, disruptive, and may regress in many of their behaviors, including not wanting to use the potty anymore, using baby talk, trouble napping, or having frequent temper tantrums (KeepKidsHealthy.com 2000). “Because children assume that babies are privy to special treatment, they often think that the best way to extra attention is to act like one,” notes Marjorie Hardy, a child psychologist. The birth of a new baby is one of the most stressful events in a young child’s life (Parrish, Parents.com n.d. ). The first way a teacher can prepare a preschooler for his or her new sibling is to prepare the parent.

#### **Setting Up A Parent/Teacher Workshop To Help Expectant Parents Prepare Their Preschoolers For A New Baby**

At the beginning of the school year, a workshop should be arranged for all parents to attend (it is possible that a parent may conceive later on). The teachers should provide the parents with a package of information that will be valuable to them and their children. Teachers should begin by telling the parents that when they have a preschooler and are expecting a baby, they can provide the older child with information about pregnancy, birth, and life with a newborn that is realistic and appropriate for their child’s age. They can prepare their older child for the approaching birth at any time during pregnancy. An expectant mother might announce the pregnancy early to explain her tiredness and vomiting. If the child is young and unable to understand waiting, it may be wise to delay announcing the

pregnancy until later, when the pregnancy becomes obvious and she begins to look “fat” to her child (Santrock 1997,124).

Asking a child to care about and make sacrifices for a relative stranger (no pun intended) is a huge request. Most adults would have difficulty complying if they were put in the same position. Imagine if your spouse brought home a new partner that took up a great deal of time and energy, wore the clothes that you are now too big for, and took over your bedroom. Wouldn't you have difficulty agreeing that this new person was the cutest thing in the world and would someday be your best friend? This may be an incredibly different (and highly unlikely) scenario, but the emotions raised by such an action may be similar to what the child is feeling (Aylward, Ladendorff & Wade Vidbook.com 1999). It is not unusual for a child to ask a parent, “When are you going to take it back to the hospital?” (Santrock 1997,127)

While the parent may be overjoyed at the new arrival of the second baby, the firstborn is likely to feel jealousy and anger at some point. The older sibling is experiencing a “de-throning.” The child is now learning to share his mother's affections with another. What is actually happening is that the parent's anxiety and concern about her children is split or shared between two children now instead of one. To the other child, it may seem as though the parents has less concern for

them - and less love. Negative feelings toward the new baby may not occur right away. Many children readily accept a new sibling when that sibling is an infant, but have difficulty dealing with a toddler who may take away their toys (Sheppard, EmpirePlanet.com 1999).

The older child may feel more involved in the process if he is allowed to help in the preparations for the baby, including decorating the nursery or helping to pick out clothing and toys and other newborn supplies. To minimize jealousy, a parent should not make too many other changes in the child's routine close to the delivery. If the child is going to move out of his crib and into a bed, it should be done well before the new baby is born. The child should not be learning new skills, such as potty training, close to the delivery date. The parent should continue to talk about the pregnancy as it progresses and prepare the child for the delivery. A visit to the hospital should be considered at this time or attending sibling classes if they are available. While in the hospital the parent should call the child frequently and, if possible, allow him or her to visit once the baby is born. When the parent comes home from the hospital, if it is at all possible, someone else should carry the baby inside or at least hand the baby to someone else and spend some time with the preschooler. A special gift can be offered to the child that will be a present from the new baby. Before the baby is born, a parent can shop with the preschooler to

buy the baby a gift that he or she can offer the new sibling. They should remind visitors to pay attention to the “older” child and not just the new baby (KeepKidsHealthy.com 2000).

There are acts that siblings can do before the birth of a new baby that can encourage children’s interest in their new sibling:

- Help choose the baby’s name. However, if parents do not mean this, they should not say it. It is not fair to ask what the child likes and then ignore his or her opinion.
- Help pick out baby’s coming home clothes.
- Teach the child how to hold the baby, supporting his head (using a doll). Show him or her how to be gentle (Korte, ParentsPlace.com n.d.).

Parents, should explain about the new baby: Babies cry a lot, they cannot walk or talk, or tell if they want something. A parent spoke about how she dealt with having a new baby with older siblings at home:

- Putting a lot of emphasis on how “big” they were and what they could help teach the new baby.
- Having them help get the baby stuff together. Encouraging their involvement. Inviting mothers with young children over to visit who had new babies.
- Reading lots of books to them.
- Daddy’s special outings and attention.
- Letting them “help” with diaper changes.



- Letting them hold the baby in their lap.
- Bathing them together.
- Praising them a lot and giving them a lot of attention.
- Doing special things with them while the baby slept or making special treats with them in the kitchen.
- Encouraging them to talk to the baby and touch the baby gently

(VanLaanen-Smit Geocities.com 1999).

One important consideration for the parent when preparing the child for the arrival of a new brother or sister, is to let him know that this is his baby, too.

Parents should be prepared for testing. The older child only wants to know that he is as important as he was before the baby arrived. There will be times when the older sibling does not know what to do with himself. After all, he was usually in mommy's arms. Now those arms aren't empty anymore. There may be times when the baby should be put down just to give the preschooler a hug

(SureBaby.com n.d).

A parent should expect some changes in the child's behavior no matter how well prepared he or she has been for the new arrival. There is negative behavior that may occur in the older sibling after the birth of the new baby. It should be stressed to the child that aggressive behavior is not allowed. If he hits the baby, he should be removed from the situation with words such as, "You are

feeling angry, but we do not hit.” Parents should never let their child hit them either; the child should be taught that hitting is not the way to show angry feelings. Children learn from actions, such as hugs, loving touches and smiles and most of all from having time spent with them (ChildYouthHealth.com n.d.).

If we, as teachers, can convey this information to our students’ parents, the children will have more positive feelings about themselves and therefore exhibit more positive behavior. However, there may be *one* parent who does not attend our workshop. We therefore, must see that our preschoolers acquire information that will help them deal with their feelings of having a new baby in their home. I have incorporated a lesson plan into my class of pre-k students which I share with all preschool teachers.

### **Preparing Preschool Children In The Classroom For A New Sibling**

During the first month of school, preschool teachers should present a lesson plan to their students that will facilitate the children’s understanding of mixed emotions they may have in experiencing a new sibling in the family. Teachers should first send home a note informing the parents of the future lesson and ask that they send a photo of each student as a baby. A week before the lesson, hang the pictures in the class at the children’s eye level and allow the children to discuss their pictures with their friends.

Begin your lesson by asking the children questions, such as: Is anyone's mommy having a baby? Who has a baby brother or sister? What do babies do? Can they feed themselves? Do they talk? Can they dress themselves? These questions generate many responses from the children and they relish speaking about their families. Follow up by bringing their baby photos to the group and announcing that they were all babies once. Ask the question: Does anyone know where a baby is born? Assure them that one doesn't have to be ill to go to the hospital. Read stories about children welcoming new siblings into their homes (I have listed books later in the article that will serve preschoolers on this subject). Tell them how much their parents love them and how both they and their parents are going to have a new baby to love.

The next day, have the children visit the dramatic play area, where dolls will be ready for the children to demonstrate what they know about babies. Ask questions: Can anyone show me how your mommy or daddy holds your baby? Why do you think they hold the baby so carefully? You can tell them that a baby is very soft and it takes a long time before they grow strong like them. Here, advice on good nutrition is helpful. "That's why you see babies drinking plenty of milk; they need it to grow up - just like you."

Talk about older babies. Babies that can sit up; one's that are beginning to

walk. Tell the children that they depend on their older brothers and sisters to help them. Mention that toddlers think everything is theirs and that is why they sometimes will take toys that are not theirs. "They don't mean it; they just not as smart as you yet." Children appreciate when one refers to how intelligent they are. Show them how they can "help mommy" feed the baby in the high chair when the baby is older.

Show the children how to "help mommy" rock the baby in the carriage to sleep. Mention that they should never speak too loud when the baby is sleeping. When children experience warmth and tenderness, they too demonstrate this behavior.

If your dramatic play area does not have the proper baby equipment, such as a doll crib, high chair, or baby carriage, make a request from your administration. If the school does not have sufficient funds, ask parents if they have second-hand articles that could be used. Parents can also be approached at the parent/teacher workshop to help with a fund-raiser.

Act out a scenario with the children, allowing them to play the parents and you the older sibling. Show impatience. "Mommy, mommy, I want to eat." "Mommy, mommy, come here." "Mommy, can I sit on your lap?" This can be done when the child is trying to feed the doll, or hold it. Then explain that it is

difficult for mommy to do two things at once, and sometimes we have to wait a little while. Explain that as teachers we sometimes cannot answer their question, or help them with their request, because we may be busy with another student in the room at the same time.

### **How Classmates Help Ease Stressful Feelings In The Student With A New Sibling**

Studies have confirmed that peers are significant members of children's social networks for children in early and middle childhood. The opportunity to interact with peers has been associated with enhanced social development. These functions may have important benefits for children who are becoming siblings. Through their interactions with one another, children develop and exercise social skills. Children who have learned to sustain play and communication with an age-mate may be better able to establish interaction sequences with a younger, more dependent child. In addition, friendships provide children with opportunities to learn how to negotiate the emotional aspects of childhood relationships, such as tolerating frustration and managing disagreements (Kramer & Gottman 1992, 685).

The best predictor of a positive adjustment to the birth of a sibling was having a best friend. Children who had a best friend during the period of time when a new sibling was born weathered the storm better. It could be that a best friend provided opportunities to participate in fantasy play and to deal with the

conflicts, frustrations, and emotional tasks that are an inevitable part of friendships. Alternatively, it could be that a best friend provided a needed ally at times and overall helped the older sibling to feel good about him/herself (Kramer, ParentNews.com1999).

Play was thought to be the major way that children could help themselves to gain mastery over stressful situations. During the transition to becoming a sibling, for example, the repetition of play themes over time was thought to allow children to safely discharge unacceptable feelings about their new sibling, and to work through anxiety-arousing events in a stress-free context. Legg, Sherick and Wadland (1974) have suggested that engagement in fantasy play that is thematically relevant to becoming a sibling may serve an important preparatory function for young children (Kramer & Schaefer-Hernan 1994, 749-751).

I find it most conducive to the older sibling if they are allowed to engage in dramatic play with their peers whenever they wish. I usually find them acting out episodes of their social life at home. It is beneficial in helping them form an understanding of how to deal with having a new brother or sister in the family.

There are many books that can be read which help children accept a new sibling and will help them understand their mixed emotions.

### **Books On New Siblings To Read In The Preschool Class**

When children hear stories that relate to their every day life their interest unfolds, especially when the stories involving new siblings compare with their feelings. There are many books available on the subject of new siblings. I have composed the following list of picture books that I found to be captivating to my preschoolers on the subject of new siblings:

Brown, M.T. (1999). Arthur's New Baby Book. New York: Random House

Cole, J.(1997). I'm a Big Brother. New York: Morrow Junior Books

Cole, J.(1997). I'm a Big Sister. New York: Morrow Junior Books

Corey, D.(1992). Will There Be a Lap For Me? Morton Grove, Ill.: A. Whitman

Hoban, R.(1993). A Baby Sister For Frances. New York: Harper Collins

Holabird, K.(1991). Angelina's Baby Sister. New York: G.N. Potter

Keats, J.E.(1992). Peter's Chair. Weston, Ct: Weston Woods

Mayer, M.(1985). The New Baby. New York: Golden Books

Rogers, F.(1985). The New Baby: A Mister Rogers' First Experience Book. New York: Putnam

Scott, A.H.(1972). On Mother's Lap. New York: Clarion Books

There are many other books in the library pertaining to new siblings, and I continue to look for the books that I feel help my preschoolers emotionally.

**Summary**

We as teachers can help our preschoolers manage emotional issues, if we take the time to look at their behavior and see where it is originating from. I have been a preschool teacher for twenty-three years and have found that a new sibling in the house can cause a certain amount of despair in some preschoolers. I feel it is necessary for teachers to have a plan in dealing with children who may not be adjusting well to their new sibling.



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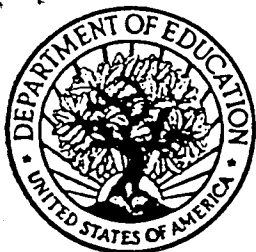
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